THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say...Forgive Us as We Forgive

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Sometimes we forget that we cannot really forgive others unless we forgive ourselves. Without self-forgiveness we can never take to heart God's forgiveness of us, we can never really accept others' forgiveness without bargaining. There is a twist in Jesus' summary of the law. He says love your neighbor as yourself. But what if we do not love ourselves? He is presupposing something which comes only as part of this total healing process, i.e., self-love. perhaps the hardest part of forgiveness is to accept oneself.

David Willis
Daring Prayer

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WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY ... FORGIVE US AS WE FORGIVE

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 6:27-38

"Forgive and you will be forgiven;" Luke 6:37

Merciful God, we come to hear the word you have for us today. We bring our burdens and our deepest joys; our anger and our love; our frustrations and our deepest hopes. In this time together, give us grace to open our hands and to let go of all that stands in the way of your grace and love and forgiveness ... in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

* * *

Is it "debts" or is it "trespasses," or is it really "sin" we're talking about when we pray, "Forgive us ...as we forgive?"

There's a wonderfully chaotic moment during the Fourth Church wedding service when we get to the Lord's Prayer and everything is going along just fine until we arrive at the part about forgiveness. Most people say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," which is certainly a mouthful in addition to always raising in my mind a large ominous "NO TRESPASSING" sign. Presbyterians have always said, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," which is shorter and cleaner. But it makes for wonderful liturgical chaos when we pray it our way during the wedding and then either wait patiently for the Catholics and Methodists and Episcopalians to catch up, or, if we want to make a point, simply plow ahead and let them try to catch up.

Someone quipped that we say "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," because Presbyterians would generally rather have their debts paid than their sins forgiven.

The truth is that Matthew says "debts": Luke says "sins," which someone once translated "trespasses." But it means more, obviously, than walking onto someone else's property when you are not wanted, just as the intention is deeper and more profound than a financial obligation, which is what a debt is.

The debts-debtors tradition is linked historically to an ancient tradition in Israel called the Jubilee. Once every fifty years, all debts in Israel were to be forgiven: debt slaves freed, property given back, accounts cleared. It was to be a year of restoration and renewal when everything goes back to the way it was and is supposed to be. Third world nations, burdened with mountains of debt, think it sounds like a wonderful idea. Banks, obviously, are skeptical. A distinguished biblical scholar, N. T. Wright, says there is no evidence that Israel ever got around to actually having a Jubilee year, but he also adds that Jesus, with his consistent and persistent emphasis on forgiveness, clearly wanted his followers to live out a kind of jubilee mentality.

In any event, I think it makes some sense, every now and then at least, to say it the way Luke reports it and to use a word that does not lead us into the areas of property rights – trespasses, or financial obligation – debts, but invokes a three letter word with plenty of content and problems of its own – sin.

The first problem we have with sin is that we just don't like the word. It is reminiscent of hell-fire and brimstone, judgmental, guilt-inducing religion from which many people spend a whole lifetime trying to escape. For another thing, when it comes to confessing our sin, we don't like to apologize for things we didn't do. One of the questions ministers are most frequently asked is, "Why do we pray that depressing prayer of confession every week?"

> "We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and what we have left undone…
>
> "We have turned from our neighbors, ignored the pain of the world, passed by the hungry, the poor and the oppressed."

The more contemporary prayers can get pretty specific:

> "We lay waste to the land and pollute the seas,
> We condone evil, prejudice, warfare and greed."

In every church I ever served, someone has come to me and said, sometimes whimsically,

> "I didn't do all that last week. I was pretty busy at work, shopping, volunteering at church, going out to dinner. I didn't have much time for condoning evil, prejudice, and warfare."

Our theology assumes that there is, in fact, something wrong with the human condition, a gap between who we are and who we could be, or who God means for us to be, a missing of the mark. Our theology assumes that what is ultimately wrong is a gap between ourselves and God. The word for the gap is sin. It does not mean that everybody does a lot of bad little things every week – although that may be the case. Sin is not smoking, drinking, dancing and playing cards – as some of us were taught as children.

What we believe is that each of us is involved in the gap and each of us does participate in the structures of society which reflect the tragedy of the human condition which results from sin. How could anyone read the newspaper on Wednesday morning and not understand. Two little boys, dressed in camouflage, acquire the weapons our laws put at their disposal, plan the strategy, ring the fire alarm and then shoot their classmates. Same page: Illinois proudly opens its state-of-the-art high-tech prison where we will incarcerate our worst criminals in small cells, with no contact with the outside world – at a cost of $35,000 per prisoner per year.

Do we not all have some accountability, some responsibility for this? Original sin, Reinhold Neibuhr once quipped, is the one Christian belief which can be objectively, empirically verified every time you pick up a paper.

Another thing you can read when you pick up the paper these days is how very difficult it is for us to say "I'm sorry." Eleven years after it was first promised, the Vatican last week issued a statement on the role of the church during the Holocaust, but it wasn't a confession or an apology. It called for repentance on behalf of individual Catholics who wronged Jews but there was not a word about institutional responsibility. Pope Pius XII helped many Jews. But not very far from the Vatican and from the Waldensian Seminary, our Presbyterian institution in Rome, is the Jewish ghetto in Rome where Jews lived for centuries, as the Christian church supported and participated in anti-Semitism and their marginalization, a ghetto into which Italian fascists crowded and walled in the entire Jewish population and from which the S.S. removed hundreds for execution, just blocks from the Vatican. Why can't we say, "We're sorry?" Why can't we say, "That was wrong and we knew it was wrong, and it was wrong that we looked away?"

What is it about us that finds it almost impossible to apologize for slavery? Of course we didn't do it. But we live in a country that was built on slavery. Every one of us has benefited from it. Why are we so offended by the notion that the continuing evil of racism and racial healing might be addressed by an apology? What would it diminish in us to say that slavery was evil, and its repercussions among us have been tragic and we, who have reaped its benefits, are sorry?

Joanna Adams, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, says that forgiveness is the most difficult of all the spiritual disciplines and one that must be learned again and again because all the people in our lives with whom we have dealings are flawed and imperfect, just as we ourselves are flawed and imperfect people and the only way we are ever going to get anywhere is for us to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

Patrick Miller, professor at Princeton Seminary, suggests that the problem we have with the whole notion of penitence, confession and forgiveness is related to the intense focus on the self in our society, which is "entirely uplifting and zealously resistant to any negative words about the self." Twenty years ago one of the most popular books was *I'm OK; You're OK*. It is still very difficult to say "I'm not OK," and it's even more difficult to say "You're not OK either."

Miller argues that there is an inclination, as well, for us not to take responsibility for our own behavior. There is, of course, precedent.

The first thing Adam does when caught eating the forbidden fruit is to blame Eve, and Eve, in turn, tries to blame the serpent. Social analysis has taught us the complexity of evil. When a man kills the woman he's living with and in the process stabs her 9 year-old son who was trying to protect her, as happened last week on the south side, it is appropriate to ask about poverty and education and unemployment. It is also appropriate to say that what happened was not only a crime, it was evil, it was, in fact, sin. Miller suggests that we too quickly look for an agency or social condition to blame – rather than hold an individual accountable. The "triumph of the therapeutic" someone called it. [See *Journal For Preachers*, Lent 1998]

Garrison Keilor wrote a short story, "*The Current Crisis in Remorse.*" The Director of the Remorse Department says,

> "We in Remorse are a radical minority within the social work community. We believe that not every wrong in our society is the result of complex factors such as poor early learning environment and resultant dissocialized communication. Some wrong is the result of badness. We believe some people act like jerks."

Keilor targets a hypothetical mainline Protestant denomination for rewriting its prayer of confession to eliminate all guilt and personal responsibility.

> "Lord, we approach Thy throne of grace, having committed acts, which we heartily do acknowledge, must be very difficult for Thee to understand. Nevertheless, we do beseech Thee to postpone judgment and give Thy faithful servants the benefit of the doubt until such time as we are able to answer all Thy questions fully and clear our reputations in heaven." [*We Are Still Married*, p. 22-24]

There are, however, deeper reasons, I think, why we find this topic difficult. David Willis alludes to one of them when he suggests that we cannot forgive others until we forgive ourselves and until we forgive ourselves we cannot experience God's forgiveness of us.

At a conference on the topic of Forgiveness sponsored by our Lorene Replogle Counseling Center, John Boyle told a powerful story of a little boy whose father gave him a book when he was 5, one of the old Horace Mann readers, entitled *Billy Boy Had a Pony.* The little boy – now a man, a distinguished and competent professional, still has the book. The boy's father wanted for him a good education, and so he sat the little boy down at the dining room table, stood behind him and tried to teach his son to read. The father got carried away and in his zeal, created intense pressure, and he slapped the back of the little boy's head each time he made a mistake trying to read about Billy Boy and his pony. The man said, "With each slap the message tattooed on my fragile psyche at that time said that I was stupid. Before long I was convinced not only of the veracity of that assessment, but that it would ever be thus, that I was doomed always to be stupid, ignorant, incompetent." Fortunately, the man and his father were able to talk about this incident, later, and to experience the gift of forgiveness. [See John H. Boyle, "Forgiveness: Cheap Grace or Hard Work"]

Jesus talked a lot about forgiveness. He intended, apparently, to live in the kingdom of God which would be characterized by forgiveness. He told stories about it; an awful story about a greedy servant who was forgiven his debts by his master and turned around and exacted full payment from his poor debtors. And he told a beautiful story about a son who takes his inheritance, leaves home, offends everybody in the process, ends up feeding pigs, comes home to apologize and before he can get the words out, his father has run down the road, opened his strong arms to his returning son. Jesus taught about a God who extends forgiveness to wayward children even before they ask. It is an amazing idea that God forgives us first, before we ask.; that we become forgiven not by working off our guilt, not by self-flagellation, or divine punishment, but by opening our hearts to the gift of forgiveness that has already been offered. It is truly "amazing grace."

I have always been intrigued by the sequence, as Luke reports it.

"Forgive and you will be forgiven." It's almost as if Jesus intentionally reverses the natural order, i.e., "You are forgiven by God so now get on with the business of forgiving one another," in order to make his point which is that there is an internal dynamic operating, a connection between forgiving others and experiencing God's forgiveness and the dynamic actually begins to operate when you and I start to forgive.

It is another radical suggestion. The mandate to forgive, John Boyle says, cuts across our concepts of fairness and justice. Justice is reciprocity: an eye for an eye – it's right there in the old law – a prescription which always leaves two people blind.

Karl Menninger said it over and over again. The impulse to punish is deep within us and it is one of our most destructive impulses. One year ago, a week after Easter, I visited the Reformed Church of Vinkovsci, Croatia. The little church building had sustained a direct mortar hit, was nearly demolished and Presbyterian One Great Hour of Sharing money had helped repair and patch it up. The people were back and eager to say thank you to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But what I also will not forget about Vinkovsci is that Serbian forces destroyed the Roman Catholic Cathedral. So Croatia Catholics retaliated by blowing up the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral.

Revenge not only doesn't work, but the resentment, anger and rage behind revenge act to make us captive to enslavement.

Until you forgive the one who has sinned against you, you are captive to your anger and resentment, ironically captive to the person whose sin still exerts its influence over you.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. In fact, Desmond Tutu has reminded the world that forgiveness and reconciliation depend on remembering what happened. People who have suffered physical, mental, sexual abuse know that it must be remembered and named before healing can happen. Forgiveness does not mean diminishing the hurt or ignoring the pain – of abuse, betrayal, violence, regret. It means making a conscious decision that the offense, whatever it was, will no longer exert influence over us. It is an intentional letting go and moving on. Forgiveness frees us from our captivity.

The late Henri Nouwen wrote,

> "To forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation. We set that person free from the negative bonds that exist between us. We say, 'I no longer hold your offense against you.' But there is more. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the 'offended one.' As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us, or worse, pull them along as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness therefore liberates not only the other

but also ourselves...." [See "The Alchemy of Forgiveness," conference transcript, Fourth Presbyterian Church, 2/7/98]

It was something like that that inspired the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin to one of the most amazing and public demonstrations of forgiveness I have ever witnessed. You may recall his accusation of sexual abuse by Stephen Cook and all the humiliating press attention. Stephen Cook then changed his story, withdrew his accusation and Cardinal Bernardin went back to work. But, all was not yet well, apparently. So Cardinal Bernardin found Mr. Cook, now living alone, critically ill with AIDS, and invited him to meet at a seminary outside of Philadelphia.

Cardinal Bernardin explained that his only reason for wanting to see Mr. Cook was to tell him that he, Cardinal Bernardin, harbored no ill feelings. He wanted to pray with Mr. Cook.

Stephen Cook accepted the invitation and said that he wanted to apologize for the hurt and embarrassment he had caused. When the meeting happened, Mr. Cook told his story, including his alienation from the church. They talked for awhile. The Cardinal said what he had come to say and he gave Mr. Cook an inscribed Bible and offered to celebrate mass. Mr. Cook hesitated at first. After all, he felt he was not welcome in his church and had not attended mass for years. Cardinal Bernardin took a hundred year-old chalice out of his briefcase. "This is a gift from a man I don't even know. He has written to me and sent it to me to use it if I ever had the opportunity to say mass for you some day." "Please," Stephen responded tearfully, "let's celebrate mass now."

Afterward, Stephen Cook said, "A big burden has been lifted from me today. I feel healed and very much at peace." Cardinal Bernardin reflected, "As we flew back to Chicago that evening, Father Donohue and I felt the lightness of spirit that an afternoon of grace brings to one's life." [*The Gift of Peace*, p. 34-41]

"...the lightness of spirit that an afternoon of grace brings..."

You are invited to that. You approach it when you pray the familiar words. And when you understand, perhaps for the first time, that Jesus died to show God's love for you, God's acceptance of you, God's forgiveness extended to you – even before you ask for it.

You make it a reality in your life when you let go of your anger and resentment and forgive those who have sinned against you.

And the promise of Jesus is that as you forgive, you will know the love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace for which every one of us longs and which every one of us needs and for which he died.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us."

Jesus said it. All praise to him.

Amen.